

The uses and limitations of telegrams in official correspondence between Ceylon's Governor General and the Secretary of State for the Colonies, circa 1870-1900

Fletcher, Paul

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Zur Verfügung gestellt in Kooperation mit / provided in cooperation with:

GESIS - Leibniz-Institut für Sozialwissenschaften

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Fletcher, P. (2010). The uses and limitations of telegrams in official correspondence between Ceylon's Governor General and the Secretary of State for the Colonies, circa 1870-1900. *Historical Social Research*, 35(1), 90-107.
<https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.35.2010.1.90-107>

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY Lizenz (Namensnennung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier:
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/deed.de>

Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY Licence (Attribution). For more Information see:
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>

The Uses and Limitations of Telegrams in Official Correspondence between Ceylon's Governor General and the Secretary of State for the Colonies, circa 1870-1900

Paul Fletcher *

Abstract: »Einsatz und Begrenztheit von Telegrammen in der offiziellen Korrespondenz zwischen Ceylons Generalgouverneur und dem Secretary of State for the Colonies, circa 1870-1900«. This article attempts to provide some examples of Ceylon's Governor's and the Secretary of State for the Colonies' uses of telegrams in communicating official correspondence. It also tries to describe the limitations of using telegrams to this end. The analysis of the article starts from 1870 – after telegraphic communication between Ceylon and England became established and stable by Ceylon's connection to the Red Sea Cable through its telegraphic link with Madras, India. The period of examination of this article ends right around the turn of the twentieth-century, for reasons of frame. The materials consulted herein include telegrams and letters found in Ceylon's original correspondence records kept at the National Archives in Kew, London.

Keywords: Telegraph, official correspondence, Ceylon, British colonial government.

1. Introduction

Ceylon's telegraph network was capable of sending and receiving telegraphic messages to places as far as London within a decade of its inception.¹ In 1858

* Address all communications to: Paul Fletcher, Karl Jaspers Centre, Voßstraße 2, Building 4400, Room 209, 69115 Heidelberg, Germany;
e-mail: fletcher@asia-europe.uni-heidelberg.de

¹ For general information on the British Empire's telegraph network, see Daniel R. Headrick, *The Tentacles of Progress: Technology Transfer in the Age of Imperialism, 1850-1940* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 97-144; Peter Hughill, *Global Communications since 1844. Geopolitics and Technology* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press 1999); Dwayne R. Winseck and Robert M. Pike, *Communication and Empire: Media, Market, and Information, 1860-1930* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 16-42; David Arnold, *The New Cambridge History of India: Science, Technology and Medicine in Colonial India* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000), 113-15. For a discussion of the history of the telegraph in general, see Jeffrey Kieve, *The Electric Telegraph: A Social and Economic History* (Newton Abbott: David and Charles, 1973); for a re-conceptualization of technological determinism in light of telegraphic technology, see Zhou Yongming, *Historicizing Online Politics: Telegraphy, the Internet, and Political Participation in China* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2006).

Ceylon's government implemented a fully functional telegraph network in its respective colony. Geographically, it traversed the breadth of the island, connecting Galle with Colombo, Kandy, and Manaar.² It was also linked to India's telegraph network – which, concurrently, had already comprised of nearly 6,000 miles of lines and 82 offices³ – by a submarine telegraph cable that ran through the Paumben Strait, from Manaar to Madras.⁴ Consequently, through Ceylon's telegraphic connection with India external telegraphic messages could be sent from, and received within, Ceylon, the utility of which was further extended in 1865 when the completion of the Karachi to London line, the "Turkish line," signaled Ceylon's ability to communicate telegraphically beyond India, including continental Europe and Great Britain.⁵ Communication along this line was often slow, however, and telegrams sometimes took months to arrive through the divided territories along which they traveled – that is, the Ottoman Empire, Germany, and France.⁶ The subsequent opening of the Red Sea submarine cable in 1870 – which extended from Bombay to London, via Aden and the Suez Canal – reconfigured the reliability and increased the frequency of using the telegraph in communicating across such long distances.⁷ It was then possible and common to communicate, along the Red Sea cable, between Ceylon and places like London in a single day.⁸

² Ceylon, *Original Correspondence* (CO 54), 27th August 1857; 15th October 1857; 27th October 1857; 24th October 1857; 28th July 1857; 10th June 1857; 28th June 1857.

³ Her Majesty's Stationary Office, *Statistical Abstract Relating to India from 1840 to 1865*. [First number] London, 1867, no. 52.

⁴ For general and in depth studies of the telegraph in colonial India see Saroj Ghose, "Commercial Needs and Military Necessities: The Telegraph in India," in *Technology and the Raj. Western Technology and Technical Transfers to India, 1700-1947*, ed. Roy MacLeod and Deepak Kumar (New Delhi, Thousand Oaks, London: Sage Publishers, 1995), 153-76; Mel Gorman, "Sir William O'Shaughnessy, Lord Dalhousie and the Establishment of the Telegraphic System in India," *Technology and Culture* 12, no. 4 (1971): 581-601; Deep Kanta Lahiri Choudhury, "'Beyond the Reach of Monkeys and Men'? O'Shaughnessy and the Telegraph in India c. 1836-56," *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 37, no. 3 (2000): 331-59; Deep Kanta Lahiri Choudhury, "India's First Virtual Community and the Telegraph General Strike of 1908," *International Review of Social History* 48 (2003): S45-71; Deep Kanta Lahiri Choudhury, "Sinews of Panic and the Nerves of Empire: The Imagined State's Entanglement with Information Panic, India c. 1880-1912," *Modern Asian Studies* 38, no. 4 (2004): 965-1002; Krishnalal Sridharani, *Story of the Indian Telegraphs: A Century of Progress* (New Delhi: Government of India Press, 1953).

⁵ Headrick, *The Tentacles of Progress*, 100-101.

⁶ For example, telegrams were additionally sent aboard mail carriers. On the 27th of March 1866, for instance, a telegram was sent from London to Ceylon, with the intention that it should be overtaken by a mail steamer due to arrive at Malta. For over a month, however, the telegram was detained in Malta for reasons unknown aboard a French 'P & O' steamship and did not arrive in Ceylon until the 28th of May. By the time it arrived the message was completely unintelligible. (CO 54), 28th May 1866.

⁷ Headrick, *The Tentacles of Progress*, 104-110.

⁸ This is similar to what Daniel R. Headrick suggests in regard to telegraphic communication from India: "If a letter took a month to reach Bombay, a telegram got there in as little as

Implicit here was the adoption of this telegraph network by Ceylon's government in communicating official correspondence⁹ between Ceylon's Governor and the Secretary of State in London. Official correspondence, which had taken several weeks to travel this distance by posted letter, became, in light of the telegraph's speed, possible to transmit in a matter of hours. From 1870, therefore, with the opening of the Red Sea cable, the colonial government was well placed to utilize the impressive speed of telegraphic communication in official correspondence. However, to what extent was this potential realized by Ceylon's colonial government? How were telegrams used in official correspondence? How did they differ from the letter? Did the telegram eventually replace letters as a form of official correspondence? If not, what were some of their limitations? Attempting to provide answers to these questions constitutes the aim and framework of this article.

2. Official Correspondence by Letter

Aside from the several telegrams sent over the Karachi to London line before 1870, letters had constituted official correspondence between the Secretary of State and the Governor of Ceylon.¹⁰ While letters functioned efficiently to this end, they nonetheless posed many difficulties. In addition to the time spent writing a letter, it took approximately one month to send a letter from Ceylon to London, having to travel by ship and mail carriers across the 5,500 miles of ocean and terrain in between. Two months was the soonest to which any letter could be responded. For the function of Ceylon's colonial administration this was sometimes problematic. The Secretary of State was occasionally oblivious to what was occurring in Ceylon at any given moment, leaving little possibility for him to interject in decisions made by the Governor if needed. And, the Governor had no way of contacting the Secretary of State for advice or reference on matters which may have required immediate action and assistance.

five hours, and the answer could be back the same day." Daniel R. Headrick, *The Tools of Empire: Technology and European Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 130.

⁹ Definition of official correspondence is any and all communication between the Governor of Ceylon and the Secretary of State pertaining to colonial government.

¹⁰ Although there were a few official correspondence telegrams sent over the Karachi to London over ground line between 1865 and 1870, the submission of these telegrams took just as long as letters, approximately one month. It is for this reason that I focus on the telegrams sent from 1870 as these were stable and sent within a few hours. The following are the telegrams used in Official Correspondence between 1865 and 1870: (CO 54) 7th December 1865; 28th May 1866; 15th September 1866; 26th December 1866; 14th January 1867; 31st August 1867; 14th December 1867; 12th March 1868; 11th June 1868; 14th May 1868; 8th July 1868; 11th July 1869; 25th November 1869; 29th November 1869.

At the apex of the so-called Indian Mutiny, for instance, on the 6th of June 1857, the Governor General of Ceylon, Henry Ward, submitted a letter to Henry Labouchere, the Secretary of State for the Colonies.¹¹ In the letter Governor Ward wrote that he had received a letter on the 29th of May from the Governor General of India, requesting urgently “that a portion of the European Regiment station in Ceylon might be shared, temporarily, for the purpose of restoring safety to our Indian possessions.”¹² According to the letter, the supply of British troops available in northern India was severely limited and would not suffice to hold back the riotous groups against which the British were then at arms. The Governor General of India was in dire need of assistance from Ceylon as the deployment of troops from the island to the mainland could be assured with relative haste, given the geographic proximity of the two colonies. In addition to describing the Governor General of India’s request for Ceylon’s troops, the letter continued for 23 more pages and included details of Governor Ward’s response to the Governor General’s letter as well as his reaction to the situation in India more generally. To summarize: Governor Ward amassed and deployed 500 troops to India by way of steamer; because of the anxiety caused by thinking that the disorder occurring in India would soon spread to Ceylon he also gave “considerable sanction to the police force, both at Colombo and Kandy” for the ostensible protection of the island; and, he described conversations contained in letters he had had with other but relevant individuals, such as General Bailey, in the course of framing his response and actions.¹³

According to the registration stamp on the letter, Henry Labouchere did not receive Governor Ward’s letter until the 15th of July.¹⁴ This was more than one month since Ceylon’s Governor had written it and nearly two months after the Governor General of India’s urgent letter had reached Ceylon’s Governor. A consideration of such disconnected dates is of importance as it indicates that all actions taken by the Governor in respect to Ceylon’s assistance to India, as well as the measures taken to serve the safety of the colony itself, were not known by the Secretary of State until after they were executed by the Governor. Henry Labouchere’s thoughts on, and immediate reactions to, such decisions were therefore rendered irrelevant. By this point in time Governor General Ward’s mind and his decisions had been made, the troops had been sent, and the island’s administrative centers were teeming with a new police force armed and geared to preserve and protect the peace. This delayed absence of the letter, therefore, fixed the Secretary of State and the Governor of Ceylon at a muted divide. Not only was the Secretary of State at the receiving end of information about events occurring in Ceylon, but the Governor, too, was isolated from the

¹¹ Ibid., 6th June 1857.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

opinions, expressions, or concerns that the Secretary of State may have had. Although the situation was handled without impunity, the slow transmission of the letter nonetheless removed the Secretary of State from the interjecting and placed limitations on how he may have reacted.

It was not only during times of crises that the slow speed of letters posed problems. Even in everyday administrative practices, such as the sending and receiving of expenditure reports, the slow pace of the letter limited the Governor's and the Secretary of State's ability to communicate. A rather lengthy and complex letter regarding the administration of the colony's surplus funds, sent to the Secretary of State by the Governor of Ceylon on the 5th of December 1865, illustrates this point well.¹⁵ To begin with, the letter represented the Governor of Ceylon's recognition of the changes to an expenditure policy which the Secretary of State had supposedly mandated in a previous letter, dated the 31st of October 1864. Until the reception of this letter, the Governor had written, it had been the normal practice of Ceylon's administration "for the appropriation of [each year's budget] to be expended within the year."¹⁶ This had meant that all sums unexpended on public works at the termination of each year were added to the surplus balance and thus became unavailable except under the expressed sanction of the Secretary of State. It also entailed that "the completion of all works unfinished on 31st December in each year had therefore to be provided for out of the revenue of the following year."¹⁷ The Governor wrote that this had caused many difficulties. It not only made finding and paying for labor challenging, but it also complicated the engineers' ability to estimate the costs of upcoming, or in progress, projects, as they "would have to arrange for funds for the following year in the middle of the current year."¹⁸

According to the Governor, the Secretary of State in the letter dated the 31st of October 1864 had, presumably, changed this policy. The Governor remarked that he had taken this letter as an indication by the Secretary of State to "place a relaxation of this [previous expenditure] practice," thus allowing "sums voted in the annual Appropriation Ordinance for any work to be expended upon if it were commenced or contracted for within two years from the date of the ordinance."¹⁹ If this were true, he conjectured, projects remain funded, without interval, for up to two years at a time; and that, as a result, the older, above-mentioned practice would be altered. The Governor continued to write that the prospect of changing the expenditure policy along such lines was received well in Ceylon. An announcement of it was made and it was "held as a boon"

¹⁵ *CO 54*, 5th December 1865.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

among members of the “legislative Council, the local press, and all intelligent members of the community.”²⁰

However, the Governor’s reason for writing the letter, dated the 5th of December 1865, was not to share this satisfaction with the Secretary of State. Rather, he wrote because he had “just received” another letter bearing the stamp of the 14th of October 1864, which presented information that contradicted the letter of the 31st.²¹ The Governor wrote: “It now seems questionable whether it was ever your [the Secretary of State’s] intention that unexpended balances on unfinished works should be brought forward at all against surplus funds, and whether, if brought forward, they should not have been re-appropriated?”²² The information in the previous letter, dated the 31st of October, which had been well received, was suddenly thwarted by the information found in the letter dated the 14th of October. Because of this, the Governor, and his plans to change the expenditure policy, became perplexed. The letter, according to the Governor, was received just two days before the Session of the Legislation was at its close and that “the Supply Bill has already been passed through Committee.”²³ Without being able to communicate straightaway with the Secretary of State and ask what he should do on the matter, the Governor was thus left to act alone. In the December 5th letter, the Governor went on to express the frustration this had caused him: “Your Letter [dated the 14th of October] has been received too late to admit any change being made in the form of next year’s Estimates and Appropriations, even if I were sure of your wishes, which I am not, [your last letters] being apparently contradictory ...”²⁴ However, continued the Governor:

given that this [subject of expenditure] has formed the subject of correspondence between the Colony and Her Majesty’s Government for the last sixteen months, but through doubts, misapprehensions, and delays no definite instructions have yet been received, that if [unambiguous instructions] should not now reach me within the next two days, another twelve months must elapse before the amount can be released, and submitted to the legislation for appropriation ... I will have therefore no choice but to follow the course adopted last year in the respect which has at all events been formally approved by you, and to ask that if Her Majesty’s Government desire the adoption of any other course I may be apprised of it before the commencement of another session.²⁵

No such instructions, by the Governor’s lettered request, arrived on time in Ceylon, however, and, whether or not the Secretary of State had wished it, the Governor went through with the policy change. Without knowing the Gover-

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

nor's confusion during this time the Secretary of State was, nevertheless, enlightened when, finally, on the 19th of January 1866, he received the letter dated the 5th of December in which the Governor's dissatisfaction and confusions were expressed and realized; albeit over a month too late.²⁶

3. Use of Telegrams

The use of telegrams in official correspondence was regularly incorporated into official correspondence from 1870, working, to some extent, to redress the problems aforementioned by providing both the Governor and the Secretary of State with an ability to communicate within a single day. Indeed, given the telegram's speed of transmission, the possibility of exchange between the Governor of Ceylon and the Secretary of State was broadened in impressive ways.²⁷ Firstly, news of events could be shared by the Governor of Ceylon with the Secretary of State on, or in approximation to, the day of their occurrence. For example, on the 25th of October 1900, for instance, the Secretary of State received the following telegram from the Governor: "L. White, engineer, Jaffna, died. Snakebite: arrange for successor."²⁸ This telegram not only informed the Secretary of State of the engineer's unfortunate death on the day of its occurrence, but from this information the Secretary of State was able to nominate shortly after a successor. The posted letter, in contrast, would have extended the process of delay on this issue by over a month, thus postponing the selection of the dead engineer's successor.

In a similar vein, secondly, telegrams could also be used by the Secretary of State to share with the Governor of Ceylon information regarding current events in London. For example, on the 2nd of March 1872 the Governor of Ceylon received the following telegram from the Secretary of State:

yesterday a youth presented a pistol at the Queen when about to leave her carriage at Buckingham palace on returning from her drive. He was immediately seized and found pistol not loaded. Her majesty behaved with greatest courage and composure and is in good health and spirits. This is sent to prevent exaggerated reports.²⁹

From this telegram the Governor of Ceylon became aware of the Queen's attack the day after it occurred and the Secretary of State was able to mediate the potential outbreak of exaggerated news reports in Ceylon. In this way too, the telegram offered possibilities that the letter could not – that is, as a form of

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Mandy Banton speaks to some extent on this subject in Mandy Banton, *Administering the Empire, 1801, 1968: A Guide to the Records of the Colonial Office in the National Archives of the UK* (London: University of London, Institute of Historical Research, 2008), 53.

²⁸ CO 54, 25th October 1900.

²⁹ CO 54, 2nd March 1872.

exchange which could be used to mediate experiences of moments, current in both London and Ceylon.

Official correspondence telegrams were not only used to inform but also, thirdly, to communicate about details. In so doing, for example, it provided the Secretary of State with a more present voice in the daily affairs of Ceylon's colonial administration. In the autumn of 1871 the Secretary of State requested by telegram that the Governor should participate in the scientific observations of the upcoming total eclipse, to which the Governor replied, after viewing the cosmic phenomenon, that it had been a great success;³⁰ on the 24th of January 1872, the Secretary of State demanded that the Governor "send immediately a copy of that year's Blue book of Statistics;"³¹ and, on the 19th of July 1875, the Secretary of State urged that the Governor must not make judicial appointments "till heard from by next mail."³² Such flexibility, as exemplified by these few telegrams, gave the Secretary of State an ability to direct the Governor on very minute details, such as scientific observations, the necessity to have a certain colonial document, and to request that he wait for further news, thus allowing the Secretary of State to send quick, concerted information which was valuable to him and of which the Governor was pressed to address.

Telegrams also provided the Governor with the capacity to, fourthly, enquire and question the Secretary of State. In preparation for the Princess of Saxony's visit to Ceylon in 1875, for example, the Governor had a specific desire to know if "special leave duties is necessary for officials and others at levee and other public entertainments during the princesses' visit, or will simple evening cheers suffice in cases where there is no recognized official uniform."³³ While ambiguous to us, this telegram was, nonetheless, a request to the Secretary of State for advice on a subject which the Governor was more or less at a loss by himself to know. With the nearing arrival of the princess, a lettered response would have never reached either the Governor or the Secretary of State in time for such a consideration. Similarly, the Governor was able to express any concerns that he may have had, such as that, for example, he had experienced during the preliminary construction of the breakwater in Colombo's harbor. On the 14th March 1873 he telegraphed to the Secretary of State: "has the engineer for the Breakwater been decided on are anxious to begin in preliminary work."³⁴ In this way, too, the Governor was able to get advice from, or express concerns to, the Secretary of State regarding situations that he would have normally dealt with alone. The telegram thus enabled ex-

³⁰ Ibid., 17th Sept 1871; 18th September 1871; 12th December 1871.

³¹ Ibid., 24th January 1872.

³² Ibid., 19th July 1875.

³³ Ibid., 20th September 1875.

³⁴ Ibid., 14th March 1873.

pressions, commands, and questions to be made with the understanding that they would be received and then dealt with promptly.

The capacity of telegrams in official correspondence was not restricted to these few cases, however. Indeed, as the hundreds of telegrams in the Ceylon's colonial records attest, there were as many telegrams as there were possibilities of communication itself. Also, telegrams were often used to express thanks for appointments immediately following the given appointment,³⁵ to describe the current financial status of the island's revenue,³⁶ to disambiguate information in a letter within the same day the letter was received,³⁷ to send word ahead of vessels to quarantine them in light of epidemic outbreaks,³⁸ to track the travels of widows returning home to England,³⁹ to report on someone's health,⁴⁰ and to request a leave of absence or an extended leave of absence,⁴¹ even a week or a day before the leave's expiration. In many ways, therefore, the telegram created new techniques in which Ceylon's Governor and the Secretary of State could communicate, in ways not compatible with the slower system of letter writing and the post.

We might assume, then, that the use of the letter in official correspondence would have gradually diminished during the period under consideration, given the communicative capabilities of the telegram for both the Governor and the Secretary of State; that the technology had, in some way, determined the course of official correspondence for the rest of the century. However, the letter, and not the telegram, continued to serve as the main form of official correspondence. Not only were there thousands more letters than telegrams used; but, as the organization of the colonial records indicate, telegrams were treated as secondary or supplementary forms of communication in respect to the letter.⁴² It was letters which substantiated the final word on any given situation. Why, then, in light of the telegram's dynamic capabilities, did the letter, rather than becoming eclipsed by the telegram, continue, and to such a large extent, as the main form of official correspondence?

³⁵ Ibid., 4th October 1892.

³⁶ Ibid., 4th January 1880; 6th March 1895; 16th January 189; 7th February 1898; 17th July 1900.

³⁷ Ibid., 6th July 1871.

³⁸ Ibid., 23rd March 1877; 28th February 1890.

³⁹ Ibid., 2nd May 1890.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 30th November 1892; 17th August 1900; 29th November 1900; 23rd August 1875.

⁴¹ Ibid., 10th September 1895; 15th November 1870; 1st January 1889.

⁴² Ceylon Register of Correspondence CO 337/3-19.

4. Limitations of the Telegram

For all of the practical possibilities which telegrams brought to official correspondence there were limitations which made it impossible for telegrams to replace letters in official correspondence. There appear to be a few fitting answers as to what these were. We can first of all assume price barriers; yet, this assumption is only accurate to an extent. The price of a telegram was significantly higher than penny-postage letters. For instance, the telegrams sent by the Governor of Ceylon on the 15th of February and the 4th of June 1868 cost, respectively, £10.12.8 and £21.4.0. Nevertheless, the costs of both telegrams were eventually refunded by government subsidies and debited directly to Ceylon's treasury account on the 10th of June 1869.⁴³ In fact, this practice of refunding governmental telegrams was standard and covered every governmental telegram sent by Ceylon's Governor until the early 1870s, at which time evidence of the practice completely vanished from colonial records. While it is possible that this may indicate that telegrams, submitted after this period, were not subsidized, it is more probable, however, that governmental telegrams were sent free of charge. The full capacity of this claim cannot be substantiated in this article due to a lack of sufficient information.

Regardless, there was a greater limit to telegraphic messages' uses in official correspondence than price. Namely, telegraphic messages could not conform to, or represent, the expressive verbosity common in the language used by colonial officials in colonial documents at the time. In fact, a significant reason that the use of letters continued throughout the period was due to the limitations of language rooted in the system of telegraphic message writing. The standard 20-words-or-less telegraph format, established in Ceylon in 1862,⁴⁴ ensured that fewer words could be said in a standard telegram than the limitless amount of words allotted in letters. This is not to say that there were no successful attempts to exceed the 20 word limit. The first telegram transmitted to the Secretary of State in 1870 on the 7th of March included the following information, comprising well over 20 words:

R. Bersce accepts the Colonial Secretaryship of the Straits settlement but I beg he may be allowed to remain here until after the Duke of Edinburgh visit it is desirable that he should go round all the irrigation works in the Eastern province with Mr. Birsch before he leaves for Singapore which he will be able to do towards the end of May.⁴⁵

In general, the Governor and the Secretary of State wrote within the confines of the 20 word limit and sent curt and succinct telegraphic messages, such

⁴³ CO 54, 10th June 1869.

⁴⁴ CO 54, 14th May 1862.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 7th March 1870.

as: “arrangements being made for summons embarking for Sydney in a fortnight,” as on the 19th of July 1899.⁴⁶ Or, sometimes sent were encoded, misspelled messages like this one from the Secretary of State to the Governor of Ceylon on the 2nd of March 1875 (as it appears):

London de Colombo 1310 20 19 3 SR=Lord CARNORVOR LNDN=
MARCH NINETEENTH NO SUV EYORS AVAILABLE FROM SURVEY
FOR DEPETREMENT RALWAY SURVEYS SENDS OUT MORE RAIL-
WAY SURVEYORS= GOUVERNOR.⁴⁷

Compared to any letter of the period the language used in the telegram was inherently distinct. Letters were well written, grammatically and stylistically mastered. They gave details about events and elaborated on ideas in well-structured, numbered, and paragraphed compositions. Telegrams, on the other hand, were short, sometimes unintelligible, and they could not describe or deliberate on an event in any successful manner. They lacked a given structure as well, sometimes appearing in single sentences, other times as blocks of unpunctuated text. Although telegrams were useful in the ways I have described above, it was still necessary for both the Secretary of State and the Governor to communicate by letter. For all the benefits which the speed of telegrams brought, telegrams nevertheless paled in comparison to letters in respect to their verbosity, clarity, and rational exposition.

While telegrams were useful in breaching the month long silence inherent in letters, it was often the case that once telegrams had been transmitted, a letter, regarding the same event or circumstance yet encompassing a more coherent description, was subsequently sent. For instance, a telegram was transferred by the Governor on the 28th of March 1883, informing the Secretary of State of the chaos engulfing the southwestern city, Kotahena⁴⁸, during the Buddhist and Catholic riots:

Serious riot here on Sunday between Roman Catholics and Buddhists ... outnumbered by thousands and were overpowered, military called in when mob dispersed. Mob again attempted on Monday and suppressed by ... town now quiet. 50 rioters apprehended waiting trial, 20 rioters injured taken to hospital ... Riot caused by false stories that insults were offered by Buddhists to Christian symbols. Merchants took no part in mob.⁴⁹

Additionally, there were two other telegrams used to communicate the circumstances of the riot succeeding this telegram.⁵⁰ They, too, pronounced the

⁴⁶ Ibid., 19th July 1899.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 2nd March 1875.

⁴⁸ Kotahena is a town on the outskirts of Colombo. For more information, see Tessa Bartholomeusz, “Catholics, Buddhists, and the Church of England: The 1883 Sri Lankan Riots,” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 15 (1995): 89-103.

⁴⁹ CO 54, 28th March 1883.

⁵⁰ Unfortunately, these other telegrams were “destroyed under statute” of the Public Office Act of 1877. Banton, *Administering the Empire*, 99.

beginning stages and anxieties of the riot. However, in addition to these telegrams, a letter regarding the riot was later mailed to make sense and extrapolate upon the subject of the riot in all its facets – to provide explanations, specific details, and consequential deliberations – something, which the short blurbs of language used in telegrams, could not equal.⁵¹ Although long, I think that it is important for the sake of understanding the elucidated language common among these colonial letters to represent at least part of the letter here:

My Lord, With reference to my telegram of the 28th march reporting the riot of the 25th, I have the honour to state that legal proceedings are being taken against some of the rioters the results of which shall be reported when they are concluded ...

2. I visited the Colombo Hospital last Wednesday and saw the men who had been admitted after the Riot, and I learnt from Dr. Kynsey that there had been no more deaths among them, but all were in a fair way to recovery.

3. The proximate cause which led to the riot was the jealousy of the Roman Catholics, fanned into a flame by rumours spread (whether designedly or not ascertained) that the Buddhists were carrying in a procession images or pictures in ridicule of Christianity. The Buddhists of Colombo have just completed the building of a new temple which is said to have been begun fifty years ago. Like all Buddhist temples this contains a statue of the Buddha, and the closing ceremony of the construction was to be celebrated in the Buddhist manner of painting the eyes of the statue. This ceremony which may be compared in some respects to the consecration of a church in Europe is usually accompanied by Persheras or processions from the country round varying according to the sanctity or otherwise of the new Temple. In the present case the new temple was widely known, and many Buddhists were prepared to go there in procession offering gifts. The ceremony of opening the eyes (as it is called) is usually performed on the day of the full moon, and the High Priests fixed on the full moon which, according to the Sinhalese reckoning, fell on the 23rd of march for their ceremony ...⁵²

⁵¹ Ibid., 2nd April 1883.

⁵² The following is a representation of the letter in full:

1. 'My Lord, With reference to my telegram of the 28th march reporting the riot of the 25th, I have the honour to state that legal proceedings are being taken against some of the rioters the results of which shall be reported when they are concluded.....'

2. I visited the Colombo Hospital last Wednesday and saw the men who had been admitted after the Riot, and I learnt from Dr. Kynsey that there had been no more deaths among them, but all were in a fair way to recovery.

3. The proximate cause which led to the riot was the jealousy of the Roman Catholics, fanned into a flame by rumours spread (whether designedly or not ascertained) that the Buddhists were carrying in a procession images or pictures in ridicule of Christianity. The Buddhists of Colombo have just completed the building of a new temple which is said to have been begun fifty years ago. Like all Buddhist temples this contains a statue of the Buddha, and the closing ceremony of the construction was to be celebrated in the Buddhist manner of painting the eyes of the statue. This ceremony which may be compared in some respects to the consecration of a church in Europe is usually accompanied by Persheras or

processions from the country round varying according to the sanctity or otherwise of the new Temple. In the present case the new temple was widely known, and many Buddhists were prepared to go there in procession offering gifts. The ceremony of opening the eyes (as it is called) is usually performed on the day of the full moon, and the High Priests fixed on the full moon which, according to the Sinhalese reckoning, fell on the 23rd of march for their ceremony.

4. To make clear what followed I must notice that the Roman Catholics commenced in 1870 to build a large and commodious stone cathedral dedicated to Saint Lucia, in the vicinity of the new Buddhist Temple. The cathedral is not yet finished, but the nave is far completed as to be opened for public worship. There has naturally been much jealousy between the adherents of the two religions, thus brought into immediate contact with each other; but the Roman Catholic Bishop, Monsignor Paynani, has lived many years in Ceylon on friendly terms with the Buddhists and I had no reason to believe that he would, nor do I believe that he did, either encourage or allow the furious opposition to the Buddhists which led to the recent riot.

5. The day of the full moon which the Buddhist priests selected for their ceremony happened to be in the Christian Calendar Good Friday, and the Inspector General of Police apprehended that the formation of the procession on that day (which must necessarily pass close to Saint Lucia's Cathedral) would be offensive to the Catholics, and lead to disturbances. It was therefore arranged by the Inspector General, after some difficulty, that the Buddhist ceremony should be postponed until after the Roman Catholic service on the morning of the 25th, i.e. Easter Sunday. Major Tranchell the acting Inspector General went himself to see the Roman Catholic Bishop and the Bishop said he had no objection to it in the afternoon provided that nothing insulting to the Christian religion was carried in the procession. Accordingly the procession was allowed to take place but when passing the cathedral it was violently assaulted by thousands of Roman Catholics with sticks, stones, and brick bats. The police some lightly in number being only armed with batons were overpowered and it was necessary to call for military aid, which the magistrate promptly did, before order could be restored.

6. It was evident that in the excited state of the people any attempts to renew the processions would lead to a renewal of the fight, and therefore the permits which had been already given by the police for processions on the day following were recalled and the processions, which notwithstanding were formed, were stopped by the police from entering the town.

7. For the present I have thought it necessary to forbid all processions in Colombo, but this is only temporary, and it will be necessary to allow the Buddhists to have their procession to make the accustomed offerings as soon as can safely be done.

8. It is manifest from the reports I have received that the Roman Catholics were the aggressors in the riot. The Buddhists were conducting their Perahera peacefully enough when they were furiously attacked by the Roman Catholics collected near *their* Cathedral, and though when attacked they retaliated the blame of the first commencement of the riot must be laid on the Catholics. On the other hand, it is first to the Catholics to say that stories were spread of insults to their religion by the Buddhists, and it is fair to believe that they were to some extent influenced by those stories. That the stories *were* false was ascertained by the Inspector General, who deputed a Roman Catholic Superintendent of Police to examine the various banners and shrines exhibited in the Perahera, and he passed them as unobjectionable.

9. I have made this report from the letters chiefly of the Acting Inspector General of Police and with other information as I could avail myself of, but I intend to appoint today a Commission to enquire into the *origin* of the disturbances, as that will hardly be investigated in the legal proceedings with sufficient fullness.

10. It is my duty to bring under your lordship's notice the valuable services rendered in this affair by the Garrison of Colombo under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Stickley R.E. in the temporary absence of Lieutenant Colonel Duncan of the (102nd) Royal Dublin Fusil-

The letter gained greater ascendancy and was used more often than the telegram not only because it allowed for clearer and more detailed expository expression, however. In fact, an even greater disjuncture between the two mediums lay within the system of official correspondence itself. I argue here that the most significant reason letters were used more often than telegrams was because official correspondence was fundamentally a formal enterprise – and the telegram, in contrast, was fundamentally informal. This can be considered if we first take what official correspondence meant to Ceylon's government. Since Ceylon was a Crown Colony, the British Crown technically held power over all legislation carried on in Ceylon.⁵³ In reality, however, a more diffused system of government was used in ruling Ceylon. At the head of Ceylon's government was the Secretary of State for the colonies, a member of the British Cabinet who was officially in charge of managing all governmental affairs involved in the administration of Ceylon. However, as the Secretary of State's position entitled him to remain in London as well as control multiple British colonies, a Governor, appointed by the British Monarch on the advice of the prime minister, was used to maintain executive power in Ceylon.⁵⁴ In this role, the Governor exercised virtually all the constitutional functions of the Crown within Ceylon, combining in essence the functions of "king and prime minister."⁵⁵ Nevertheless, nearly all governmental decisions and actions made by the Governor within Ceylon had to be first approved by the Secretary of State and any acts of government desired by the Secretary of State had to be carried out by the Governor. In this way, the government of Ceylon was based on the interactive relationship between the Governor in Ceylon and the Secretary of State in London. Official correspondence was the medium through which these two sites of power communicated. It was therefore a hierarchical and formal exchange as it represented the two seats of government and thus Crown government itself, in all its representations and physical manifestations – and was not merely a practical means of conveying communication.

iers, both on Sunday the 25th and Monday the 26th. My special thanks are due to the Brigade Major, Major Currie, and to Captain Mills of the Royal Dublin Fusiliers in command of the troops employed. To these officers and to the admirable discipline of the soldiers, their constancy and patience under the trying circumstances of the Riot, it is owing that the disturbances were suppressed without the use of firearms and with the result of only one death; and that one not at the hands of the military but in the Riot. In fact, no one was injured by the soldiers; all the injuries on those who were received into the hospital being from blows with sticks or by stones.

11. The latest reports today appear to show that all is quiet.

I have the honor to be My Lord, Your Lordship's obedient humble servant, Arthur Gordon.

⁵³ Banton, *Administering the Empire*, 11.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 15-16.

⁵⁵ Sir F. D. Lugard, *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa* (Edinburgh and London: Blackwood, 1926), 95 quoted in Banton, *Administering the Empire*, 16.

This was not just a matter of cordiality, however, as there were strict instructions concerning official correspondence laid out in detail in the *Rules and Regulations for the Information and Guidance of the Principal Officers and Others in His Majesty's Colonial Possessions*.⁵⁶ In this regularly updated publication, found in the annual *Colonial Office List*, instructions were given by the Colonial Office in regulating the mode in which Governors and the Secretary of State corresponded.⁵⁷ It not only detailed the proper way to address hierarchy, but also regulated the way communication was to be written, numbered, and formatted, including the size and type of the paper used; additionally, it described how correspondence was to be recorded and then documented in register lists. In total, there were twenty-four rules just for the Governor alone to follow.

Letters, and not telegrams, embodied such rules. As previously stated, letters were intricate, well planned, numbered, and dedicated. In fact, the entire first page of most letters was used to describe only the honor of receiving and writing the letter, before the main issue of the letter even began. The closing was then again formal as it indicated the humbleness with which the letter had been written; and it was signed, certifying officially the identity of the person by whom the letter was written. Also, the colonial government hired professional letter writers to compose its correspondence, to ensure perfect grammar and handwriting. In fact, the entire practice of letter writing was an exercise in maintaining the standard set within “rules and regulations” and thus the formal and hierarchical nuances of Ceylon’s Crown government.

In contrast, telegrams respected no hierarchy and made no formal entreaty of address save the completion of the mandatory to-and-from categories found on the face of the telegram. The writers of telegrams used short phrases, poor punctuation, crass grammar and sometimes mysterious language. And usually, but not always, telegrams were transmitted along a number of lines, sometimes through telegraph offices of non-English speaking, or poorly literate, telegraph clerks. Telegrams therefore exemplified neither a respect for the chain of command inherent in official correspondence nor the guidelines of the “rules and regulation” publication, whereas letters wholly represented them.

It is for these reasons, too, that we witness the development of a practice to make lettered receipts of telegrams used within official correspondence. Indeed, in order for the telegram to be used as official correspondence, the following system evolved. In most but not all cases, following the Governor’s submission of a telegram a letter concerning the telegram was subsequently sent either on the same day or a few days after.⁵⁸ In the letter the Governor pointed the attention of the Secretary of State to the fact that a telegram had

⁵⁶ Colonial Office List, 1878; see Banton, *Administering the Empire*, 333.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ CO 337/3-19.

previously been sent. Included was a direct quotation of the message found in the telegram; and, at times, any additional information that the Governor felt necessary was also added. Likewise, when the Secretary of State sent a telegram to the Governor, the Governor in return sent a letter to the Secretary of State to acknowledge the receipt of his received telegram. In it, he too pointed attention to the fact that he had received a telegram by the Secretary of State, included a direct quote of the telegram's message as well as any additional information, such as how he responded to the telegram. The important thing to consider here is that the letter and not the telegram was entered into the correspondence register list. Even in cases in which the practice of writing a follow-up letter was not made, a telegram still did not become a separate, numbered despatch, but remained solely described as a telegram. This meant that telegrams were recognized as an "official" form of correspondence only through the process of writing a supplementary letter in conjunction with it. This was because without the additional letter there would have been no respect paid to the formal and regulated structures of official correspondence as embodied in the form and content of the letter.

As a consequence of this, every act of government had to materialize in the form of a letter. Thus, as a result of the rules delineated by the Colonial Office in the "rules and regulation" guidelines as well as the hierarchy intrinsic to the colonial government itself, to which only letters could respectively represent, telegrams never became the main form of official correspondence during the period under consideration. Rather, telegrams were left to compliment or supplement a system of official correspondence which was wholly constituted in the letter – despite the telegrams' resourceful and innovative ways of allowing the Secretary of State and the Governor of Ceylon to communicate.

5. Conclusion

The telegram made possible what letters could not. It allowed for immediate reactions to immediate subjects such as death; it gave the Secretary of State the ability to enlighten the Governor of Ceylon on events of immediate importance occurring in London; it gave the Secretary of State faster command over the Governor; moreover, it provided the Governor with the ability to make specific, last minute requests. However, letters remained the main form of official correspondence throughout the period under consideration. I demonstrated here that there were a few reasons for this. These reasons delineated the colonial government's persistent use of letters in official correspondence. However, as I argue in the final part of this article, every act of government, which materialized in the form of official correspondence, was also a representation of the hierarchical relationship between the Governor of Ceylon and the Secretary of State. As a consequence, official correspondence was a strictly formal affair, requiring firm attention to the expository regulations along the lines indicated

in “rules and regulation.” Letters, and not telegrams, embodied such formalities. It is for these reasons, therefore, that letters continued in use as the main form of official correspondence throughout the period under consideration – and ultimately, too, what shaped the uses and limitations of telegrams in Ceylon’s colonial government.

References

Primary sources

- Ceylon’s Original Correspondence (CO 54).
 Ceylon Register of Correspondence (CO 337).
 Colonial Office. Colonial Office List, 1878.
 Her Majesty’s Stationary Office. Statistical Abstract Relating to British India from 1840 to 1865. [First number] London, 1867, no. 52.

Secondary sources

- Arnold, David. *The New Cambridge History of India: Science, Technology and Medicine in Colonial India*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000.
 Banton, Mandy. *Administering the Empire, 1801, 1968: A Guide to the Records of the Colonial Office in the National Archives of the UK*. London: University of London, Institute of Historical Research, 2008.
 Bartholomeusz, Tessa. “Catholics, Buddhists, and the Church of England: The 1883 Sri Lankan Riots.” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 15 (1995): 89-103.
 Blasingham, S. V. “The Administration of Sir Henry Ward: Governor of Ceylon, 1855-60.” *Ceylon Historical Journal* 11 (1968).
 Ghose, Saroj. “Commercial Needs and Military Necessities: The Telegraph in India.” In *Technology and the Raj. Western Technology and Technical Transfers to India, 1700-1947*, edited by Roy MacLeod and Deepak Kumar, 153-76. New Delhi, Thousand Oaks, London: Sage Publishers, 1995.
 Gorman, Mel. “Sir William O’Shaughnessy, Lord Dalhousie and the Establishment of the Telegraphic System in India.” *Technology and Culture* 12, no. 4 (1971): 581-601.
 Headrick, Daniel R. *The Tentacles of Progress: Technology Transfer in the Age of Imperialism, 1850-1940*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.
 Headrick, Daniel R. *The Tools of Empire: Technology and European Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1981.
 Hughill, Peter. *Global Communications since 1844: Geopolitics and Technology*. Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1999.
 Kieve, Jeffrey. *The Electric Telegraph: A Social and Economic History*. Newton Abbott: David and Charles, 1973.
 Lahiri Choudhury, Deep Kanta. “‘Beyond the Reach of Monkeys and Men’? O’Shaughnessy and the Telegraph in India c. 1836-56.” *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 37, no. 3 (2000): 331-59.

- Lahiri Choudhury, Deep Kanta. "India's First Virtual Community and the Telegraph General Strike of 1908." *International Review of Social History* 48 (2003): S45-71.
- Lahiri Choudhury, Deep Kanta. "Sinews of Panic and the Nerves of Empire: The Imagined State's Entanglement with Information Panic, India c. 1880-1912," *Modern Asian Studies* 38, no. 4 (2004): 965-1002.
- Lugard, Sir F. D. *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa*. Edinburgh and London: Blackwood, 1926.
- Sridharani, Krishnalal. *Story of the Indian Telegraphs: A Century of Progress*. New Delhi: Government of India Press, 1953.
- Winseck, Dwayne R. and Robert M. Pike. *Communication and Empire: Media, Market, and Information, 1860-1930*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007.
- Yongming, Zhou. *Historicizing Online Politics: Telegraphy, the Internet, and Political Participation in China*. Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2006.